

**I WAS TALKING ABOUT LOVE—
YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT GEOGRAPHY**



*I was talking about love—you are talking about geography.
It sounds very similar, somehow.*

-Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls*

*Fucked up, you knew you'd never fall for someone
not fucked up*

-Frank Bidart, *Metaphysical Dog*

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Table of Contents

Clicking through Karen's Wedding Pics	1
California December.....	3
New Year, Same Vomit	4
We Sleep With Computers.....	6
Morning Offering	7
The Wedding Reception	9
You, Me, and Red Knots.....	11
100 Unicorns	13
It's Not So Much the Heat	16
So the Algorithm Thinks We're a Match.....	17
Seventeen	18
Daffodil Moans.....	19
Interfacing with the Bae	20
Fourth of July Twilight Zone Marathon	22
On Leaving Chicago	23
What the Road Trip Taught Us.....	25
Dunkin' Donuts.....	27
Acknowledgements	29

Clicking through Karen's Wedding Pics

Winter—taking inventory of myself
by taking inventory of everyone else's internet

life. In a minute you're engaged and wedding-
dressed and home-owning and dog-shopping.

You're facing away from the camera
during the first dance. Your friends are all

in orange. I'd assumed they'd all be blonde, too.
I keep clicking and unclicking through the grime.

At my computer, now looking at myself
grinning in my old Pontiac, belligerent at a baseball game,

and in dark bars, and choking up over an old
Portland sunset. I'm lost in an airport in Nebraska,

studying in a coffee shop, hammered
at the horse track, coming undone at Standee's

24 hour diner. Seething right now
at my desk and in the past seven years

of photos. There's me sweating my balls off
at an electronic slot machine in the back

of the Twilight Room in North Portland,
trying to forget the way you'd

let me piss in the trees when
we were drunk late, talking on the bluff

above the river, not cheating
on our girl/boyfriends, terrified

of this new type of love we'd discovered.
But right now you're smiling in Brussels

and San Diego and Dayton, holding Joe
next to a waterfall and on the beach

and I'm seething at my laptop
and in all my pictures, talking myself

out of messages and likes and comments,
suckling on emotional ups and downs until

I find the two of us among a group of friends,
four years ago, sweaty from hiking Forest Park,

your eyes looking across the picture
at me then, telling me now

to get out of my chair, to get closer,
to close the window and shut down.

California December

I shrivel when I land. Like a lizard
in the yard, head burst, and the body still
jiggling after dad stepped on it. The valley
is changed—stale and lusting. But the car
next door hasn't moved, tires all bled into
asphalt, a smell inside that grows every day.
The hills have been skinned, scattered earth waiting,
and some dead thing blows in the wind. All the browns
of my childhood appear overslept,
like a headache all day, a dark halo
that dissolves the ground into mush. Like it
could remember water. Like me hiding
upstairs in bed, where I masturbate
in silence, listening for airplanes.

New Year, Same Vomit

Hiding out at 2 am
in the mini golf parking lot,
I cleaned up the backseat.

Kristin and I drank red wine
and watched the sewage canal,
toasted to another year

of not adjusting well
to living at home. Jangling
from job to job. Old friends

keep getting married and we're still
finding exciting new places
to drink outside. Two days

later, she's watching the sunset,
stuck on the 405,
going stale in traffic.

It's 7:30 when I call
and she sighs, asking me to talk
her all the way home.

The drone of my voice somehow
more soothing than music
or talk radio or her own thoughts.

She pipes in to gripe about Todd,
still Todd, still dating Todd
off and on since we were 19.

She tells me a Todd that no one
else knows, a Todd buying flowers,
making her bacon, knowing

her Netflix password—a Todd
we can all root for no matter
what her mom says. Her voice flashes

a warning, says she'll go back
and back again, says someday
she'll move out, find the right

guy, the right job—it'll be
different. She'll drink alone
in her bedroom tonight.

I mumble happy new year
into the phone. I get in
my car and drive and drive.

We Sleep With Computers

Most nights they just sort of lie there—they don't really do much. A new kind of nightlight, pulsating next to our faces, humming louder as their fans grow angry with dust. Comforting us with the same TV shows: *Frasier* over and over. Some nights we watch people fucking on our computers. Some nights we pass out clicking through pictures—a party at your college apartment, an impromptu trip to the beach. Some nights I fall asleep with your face next to me on the screen, four years ago, hair blonder, wearing that plaid shirt you never gave back. Some nights our computers die while we're asleep.

Morning Offering

I wake up startled, feet dangling off the roof
of our apartment. The street beneath me,

impossibly clean. Fresh from the darkness, all
the day's clamor washed away. A praying

mantis scratches herself beside me.
She wonders why I'm up here, just as much

as I wonder the same. She feigns
to believe me when I confess confusion.

She nods, continues scratching her back, then
flitters away. Church bells somewhere and I

have a sudden, desperate desire
for a peanut butter sandwich. Not any

peanut butter sandwich—the kind Troy's dad
made that one summer camping with the scouts—

the summer Troy's brother almost drowned.
The world understanding itself differently

after—death now real and definite. Troy taught
me how to really curse that summer.

We hiked by ourselves shouting *shit fuck*
the ass bitch all the way up the hill, like the words

could free us from something. Troy moved away
a year later. His dad would die in a car

accident. Beneath me, the intersection
starts to breathe. The first honk announces

the day. A music of useless anger,
and I wish for a reason to join in.

The Wedding Reception

Looking for some surface to bash
my head on while my friends discuss
the joys of joint bank accounts.

I swivel my bar stool, find
my cousin mouthing curses
into his drink. His dark eyes

ignore me. He says *don't bother*
buying Molly a Christmas gift.
He sees her face, the way she twitches

in and out of loving him. The lights
go dim in her kisses and she tastes
like burnt toast. He knows she's leaving

him, so tonight he's leaving early,
leaving me to mostly strangers
on the dance floor, wondering

if I can drink enough
to be carried back to bed
in my uncle asshole's arms.

Or how it may be best to curl
up next to the toilet just right
so no one can find me, lying

fetal like twenty years ago
when my brother slugged me so hard
I couldn't breathe, gasping blanks

as the Nevada desert bloomed
outside the car window before
disappearing into a wet

blackness, a rest stop restroom,
barely on my feet, pissing
next to a trucker who finished

whistling "Hotel California"
before peeking over
to ask if I was ok.

You, Me, and Red Knots

We're hungover in a Vegas hotel from the entire plastic blender of margarita we got from Jimmy

Buffet's restaurant the night before when we walked, drinking aimlessly up and down the strip.

You try to distract yourself from the headache, the four hours of driving ahead, the things we might

have said the night before. You're watching a PBS documentary about red knots—these tiny birds

and their relationship with Delaware horseshoe crabs.

The red knots will migrate 9000 miles from Tierra del Fuego

up to arctic Canada to breed. My mom calls to ask when we'll arrive at her house in LA. On the last full moon in May

the red knots arrive in Delaware Bay to double their weight on horseshoe crab eggs. I tell my mom

we're still not on the road, ignoring the fact that the only voice we've heard all morning

is the documentary narrator, now describing how horseshoe crabs are harvested for antibiotics, so the red knots

can't feed enough to survive up north when they finally get to mate. You say something so typically you:

how the universe is just so beautifully connected and we're
always ruining it. *The red knots won't be able to survive*

if the horseshoe crab population doesn't increase.

I hang up the phone and look at you, the rings

around your eyes entirely focused on the television's
groan. The narrator hints there may be hope

for the red knots.

100 Unicorns

The 100th unicorn appeared faded, golden yellow, like a Twinkie. Its eyes, white of unidentifiable cream filling, and its neigh, a glorious shriek of a familiar song, like something from oldies radio, but ultimately foreign and holy.

The 99th unicorn smiled with the mushy froth of melted marshmallow; the clatter of its stomp, like a disease, stuck with me for weeks, ringing in my head, lingering in my throat.

The 98th unicorn was blue. It told us to stay away from the oak trees in Ms. Clarence's yard.

The 97th unicorn, its skin made of smog, warned of our cell phones, how they'd cause a great sickness when we're old.

The 96th unicorn was made of pickles. It giggled a stain of green juices and trotted off.

The 95th unicorn was named Davey. It sang hits from the 90s and wore a sling. It was a meek creature, tiptoeing over yellow linoleum in the kitchen, but it baked the most delicious oatmeal raisin cookies.

The 94th unicorn was stubborn, a cinnamon glow in Paris, slipping through the 11th district with its lover. It drank only margaritas, ate only octopi, and insisted on holding doors to the point of obnoxiousness.

The 93rd unicorn wasn't ready for the earthquake. It was exactly who we needed when we were out of eggs, but never home, never home when we knocked.

The 92nd unicorn, wearing necklaces heavy with beads from years of summer camp counseling, gave a speech on the injustices of the church in the 22nd century. It asked us all to be patient, as the speech was crucial to its insistence on a restructuring of the mall parking lot security protocol.

The 91st unicorn made friends fast, slicked its hair back and asked Deena to the dance. Who was Deena to resist?

The 90st unicorn was not a unicorn at all. Or so it said.

The 89th unicorn, made of crumpled pages of paper, slept in a one-room house at the peak of America, nestled along the Atlantic. It tried to wake itself, but the dream laughed at it, grinning as the thick scent of urine grew stronger.

The 88th was no one's favorite. It read young adult literature, which in and of itself was not bad, but insisted on telling you about each story in the form of a song.

The 87th unicorn thought this exercise was pointless. It laughed at me, pointed at screens of everyone passing me, asked me about all my high school classmates, its laugh growing as it scrolled through the endless sea of better people with better ideas being better at life. It smeared my favorite cheese on the window, sneezed in it, and wrote the word *Bowdoin*.

The 86th unicorn was impossible, transparent and blending into all things at once. It told me a great limerick, promised I'd need it someday, but I can't remember how it goes.

The 85th unicorn wept. It told us to keep going, to find out fathers and make promises we know we can't keep. Over a dinner of kidney beans

straight from the can, it gnawed at the fibers of reality and began knitting a new scarf, promised this one will be better.

The big sleep came somewhere between the 85th and the 84th unicorn. It was gruff and didn't last long. The night was trapped between moments of heft, a dream of an office boardroom, the unforgiving tapping of Jack Thombly's pen over scattered, nervous words, a botched proposal, Cindy and Greg from accounting giving each other eyes, the copy machine broken, and moments of brisk lightness, an awareness of the wind rattling at the window, the cat slinking across the room, the night swelling with unicorns.

It's Not So Much the Heat

Not touching each other
on a mattress on the floor, sweating
in the basement, thinking of another

way to cool down. Mid-summer.
Soggy. The apartment sagging.
Not touching each other,

not even moving amongst the clutter
of old yearbooks, boxes crumbling.
Even the dust wants another

way out. My face is melting. Butter.
June bugs scuttle on the ceiling,
not touching each other

with their little feet. Their wings stutter
but there's nowhere to go. Floundering
in the basement, imagining another

world, some way to recover.
But we're gone now. Decomposing.
Not touching each other.
In the basement, thinking of another.

So the Algorithm Thinks We're a Match

Do you have any tattoos? Have you ever had a one night stand? Do you own sexy underwear? Were you in love with the first person you slept with? Tongue rings—hot or not? Does intelligence turn you on? How often do you masturbate? Have you ever faked an orgasm? How frequently do you drink? Which pubic hair style do you prefer? Do you like to cuddle? Would you ever have sex in a graveyard? Do you have an ex you'd like to date again? Do you care about other people's suffering? Would you allow a partner to lick your anus?

Seventeen

The sky separated hours ago. Los Angeles
is an endless row of minivans, the anxious dreams
of flushed alligators deflating in the dry heat.
Deflating like us in booth seats at Denny's, our sweaty
asses sighing over endless coffee. The lights
are too bright. Gas is four dollars a gallon. Someone
will be worried if we don't make it home.
I tuck a quarter into the gumball machine, admitting
defeat to the wasted day. I can't chew with my mouth
closed, but you don't complain. I want to take off
with you again. Next time, not sitting
nervous over coffee on Ventura, staring
across the street at gangly strip mall after strip mall
and even more strip malls skulking just ahead.

Daffodil Moans

desperate to be fixed.
She doesn't even know
other cats exist.

Or anything outside
these three tiny rooms.
Some winters, I

forget too. The phone
startles us. Sheila's voice
tugging heavy at the moon

and the taste of her blues
appears on my face
in the mirror—a new

mole, new cracks on my lips.
Her news melts at me,
the words growing thick

and I find myself staring
out the window, the cat
scratching at the screen.

Her tiny paw slips
through a hole, and she squeezes
her body outside, sips

in the night, searching
for something she can't imagine.

Interfacing with the Bae

The window blinks empty. Waiting
for you to connect, my brain-bumps

curdle, seasick and expanding on all the faces
I haven't seen since high school, all the eligible

singles and pizza places within a half mile
and their accompanying pissed off reviews.

My face starts sagging in a tiny box in the corner.
I've run out of *Frasier* episodes to rewatch so

the internet digs deeper, feeds on my boredom, feeds
directly into my sweaty body's swell. My asshole

moans for me to move while I skim
articles for news about the wall I've built

in my gut. Maybe you'll arrive on screen
and I'll tell you about it and we'll fact check each other

in bed. Maybe I'll tell myself to shut up
through the webcam. Maybe I'll tell my mother

we met in a book store or write break up texts
while mixing drinks with Mountain Dew,

upload self-help videos of myself slurring,
drunk and over-caffeinated. Maybe you'll watch

and glare at me from behind your phone. You can't stand
what I post or don't post and I can't stand the look

you give me when you're not responding to my texts,
when I'm busy clicking and clicking for something else.

Fourth of July Twilight Zone Marathon

I know I love you
mommy, mommy
after she follows the dog
while our own butts plummet
and somewhere I hear
other planets
and we haven't spoken
but maybe I should
follow her through the wall
to any old big black abyss
a good thing
never shows up, never
hands you a cigarette
outside
across the country
can't imagine
yesterday
telling us to smile

when "Little Girl Lost" squeals
from another dimension
through the wall
into black and white
Jeff saying we need to colonize
to ensure our survival
since Christmas
follow him to space or
just escape
because I just can't keep
going and Rod Serling
narrates life's perplexities
when you're crying
and Jeff is driving somewhere
and I can't escape
a dimension when it's still
the soft glow of the tv
telling us it's ok

On Leaving Chicago

I look up at the sky—baby
blue and white swirls, painted
on the taco shop ceiling.

Thin layers of lengua
stare up at me, brown eyed,
speechless. Chewing these thin,

moist strips, I grow suddenly
certain I'm not ready
to move. Kathy comes home

to our empty apartment
depressed, covered in finger
paints. She boils water to make

mac and cheese, stands staring
at the bubbles. She wants to get
drunk and watch *Harry Potter*.

She wants to take a twenty
to the punk bar on Pulaski,
seize the jukebox, play

show tunes for a few hours.
Instead, she hums herself
to sleep, or I hear her

crying through the walls.
She wakes up at 5:30
all smiles, keeps it together

until the train ride, watching
strangers like they're familiar.
She pulls out her phone.

Puts it back. Pulls it out
again. She types *hello*,
hello, sends it to no one.

What the Road Trip Taught Us

That summer, eyes lolling over,
eight lanes packed, you licked yogurt
off my forehead. Ignoring

calls from home. In Philly you tried
to quit smoking and I spilled
my drink all over and we kissed or

fought or whatever. Stale bar
popcorn for dinner and the phone
just wouldn't stop weeping. I'd sleep

with my hand on her under
the pillow. She'd glow and whimper
and shout for love. Or she didn't.

The news was the same. *Grandpa's got
the gout again. Dad's in a splint.
James or Jimmy or someone*

*from high school wants to say hi.
Selling coffee at Ralph's, he seems
really ok.* You reached under

the seat for your secret pack.
Your hand came back dim and soft
and wanting. I didn't know

a Jimmy in high school. I thought
that place was gone when I left.
We pulled over at an IHOP,

ate breakfast in silence,
left our phones in the parking lot.

Dunkin' Donuts

I was drinking Dunkin' Donuts at the airport—we were all drinking Dunkin' Donuts because the century wasn't new anymore and the future was real and as much as having tiny computers in your pocket is really cool, the future kind of sucked.

I was in love, or almost in love, falling in love, or still trying to convince myself not to fall in love—I don't remember—the beginning is always fuzzy and I don't have it in me to look back through my journals. I was drinking Dunkin' Donuts and judging people who ate McDonald's still. This is the future? Are you even in love? How could someone in love in the future ever eat at McDonald's?

I never really did drugs so even the way coffee and sugar got my heart booming like "Solsbury Hill" felt pretty incredible, felt like the maybe-love feeling inside of me was actually bursting through my chest.

Peter Gabriel—that can't be his real name.

I could look that up on the tiny computer in my pocket, but I won't. I always journaled religiously, tried to write something about every single day, which seems nuts now, to do on paper.

I was drinking Dunkin' Donuts at the airport, terrified of love and other people and actually living life. I would get old and lose all my memories, frantically dig through my old journals to find this moment, to read the way I described her then, remember the way I loved her before the rodents started gnawing at the wires in my brain and all the memories went squalid.

I still don't know about that love, and maybe never will, but I remember the airport, even when I can't find it, tearing through my notebooks. I'll remember drinking Dunkin' Donuts at the airport, wondering if I was in love as the sunrise or something consumed me.

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- “Clicking Through Karen’s Wedding Pics” in *Rust + Moth*
- “You, Me, and Red Knots” in *Words Dance*
- “We Sleep With Computers,” “Interfacing with the Bae,” and “Dunkin’ Donuts” in *Wu-Wei Fashion*
- “Daffodil Moans” in *Portland Review*
- “What the Road Trip Taught us” in *Pine Hills Review*

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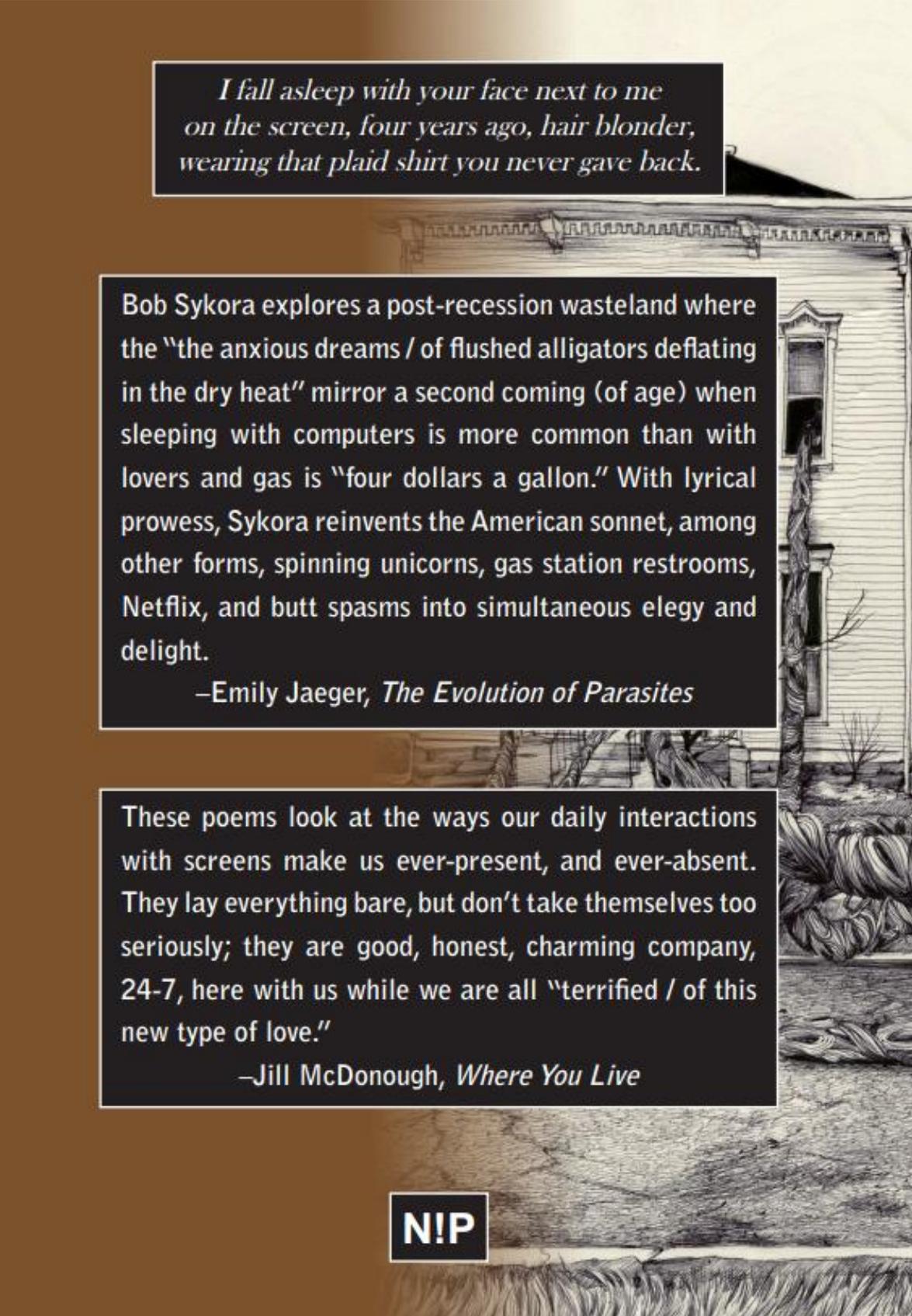
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Bob Sykora is originally from the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, CA. He currently resides in Somerville, MA, but he still likes Chicago best. Since burning out as a high school teacher, he is attempting to be a student forever. He is an MFA candidate at UMass Boston and the poetry editor for *Breakwater Review*. More of his work can be found at bobsykora.tumblr.com.



*I fall asleep with your face next to me
on the screen, four years ago, hair blonder,
wearing that plaid shirt you never gave back.*

Bob Sykora explores a post-recession wasteland where the “the anxious dreams / of flushed alligators deflating in the dry heat” mirror a second coming (of age) when sleeping with computers is more common than with lovers and gas is “four dollars a gallon.” With lyrical prowess, Sykora reinvents the American sonnet, among other forms, spinning unicorns, gas station restrooms, Netflix, and butt spasms into simultaneous elegy and delight.

—Emily Jaeger, *The Evolution of Parasites*

These poems look at the ways our daily interactions with screens make us ever-present, and ever-absent. They lay everything bare, but don’t take themselves too seriously; they are good, honest, charming company, 24-7, here with us while we are all “terrified / of this new type of love.”

—Jill McDonough, *Where You Live*

N!P